The Elusive American Dream:

An Ecofeminist Reading of Race and Identity

in Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* (1984)

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Abstract

Everyone knows the story of the big brick house with the white picket fence and the quiet subdivisions of identical houses and families. Regardless of race, class, religion, or gender, the lure of the ideal home appeals to the masses. Told with a fairytale quality, the American Dream possesses a magic that transcends space and time. For some groups, however, white fences are not the obvious boundaries. Instead, boundaries exist in the pigments of these people's skin, the block they live on, or how many letters fill up their last name. In Sandra Cisneros' novella *The House on Mango Street* (1984), the American Dream appears again, this time on a poverty-stricken, Hispanic street in Chicago, narrated by an adolescent, Mexican-American girl named Esperanza Cordero. Through the ecofeminist and ecocritical lenses, Cisneros utilizes Esperanza's readings of houses and homes to comment on the commodity culture of dwellings, revealing how Esperanza's perception of identity and selfhood is directly connected to the house of the American Dream, and further explores the function of "place," the boundaries of space, and the power of penning new boundaries.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, ecofeminism, Chicana/o literature, young adult literature, boundaries, the American Dream.
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Introduction: The American Dream on Mango Street

Everyone knows the story of the big brick house with the white picket fence, the nice, quiet subdivisions full of identical houses and identical families. Thanks to advertisements, television, canonical texts and other avenues of popular culture, today's technology-enhanced era reinforces the idea of the "American Dream" through mass media 24/7. Regardless of race, class, religion, or gender, the lure of the ideal home appeals to the masses. Told with a fairytale quality, the American Dream possesses a magic that transcends space and time. According to Harold Bloom, the American Dream represents one of the "crucial topics" that "[expresses] the whole concern of human existence in the twenty-first century" (Bloom xi). Bloom goes on to explain that Benjamin Franklin "gave us the definitive formulation of the American Dream" in his autobiography, specifically defining the concept as "a rise from rags to riches" (23). While the rags to riches theme exists in other, diverse literature, the specific American interpretation and ideology hinges upon the effort and hard work of the individual, traditionally the patriarchal breadwinner of the home, toward economic prosperity (Bloom 23), while the wife remains

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indoors as the keeper of the home. In Sandra Cisneros' novella *The House on Mango Street* (1984), the American Dream appears again, this time on a poverty-stricken Hispanic street in Chicago during the 20th century, narrated through the experiences of an adolescent, Mexican-American girl named Esperanza Cordero. Through an ecofeminist lens, Cisneros utilizes Esperanza's readings of houses and homes, universal spaces of domesticity, to comment on the commodity culture of dwellings, revealing how Esperanza's perception of identity and selfhood is directly connected to the house of the American Dream.

An Ecocritical Reading of Place

In Cisneros' novella, "place," as an ideological function that reveals historical underpinnings of race and gender, becomes the focus of Esperanza's narrative, specifically the role of women within their place. According to Maya Socolovsky, "Ecocritical approaches to literature—studying the relationship between literature and the physical environment—recognize that we define ourselves socially, culturally, and politically through 'place'" (202). Socolovsky goes on to explain how "place" functions as a "socially produced ideological concept" (202), reinforced by patriarchy through avenues of popular culture and mass media. As the ultimate environment of humans, Earth acts as the most familiar place between men and women alike. However, the ecofeminist perspective reveals the observable connection between Earth and women, when Earth is gendered and personified as *Mother* Earth: the land equates to the female body, and many adjectives employed to describe women are often used to describe nature as well. Thus, a physical place or object can directly connect to a person's identity through the meaning associated with a term. Further, Lee Cuba and David M. Hummon acknowledge this connection through their definition of "place identity":

> In general terms, place identity can be defined as an interpretation of self that uses environmental meaning to symbolize or situate identity. Like other forms of identity, place identity answers the question—Who am I?—by countering—Where am I? or Where do I belong? From a social psychological perspective, place identities are thought to arise because places, as bounded locales imbued with personal, social, and cultural meanings, provide a significant framework in which identity is constructed, maintained, and trans-formed. Like people, things, and activities, places are an integral part of the social world of everyday life; as such, they become important mechanisms through which identity is defined and situated. (113)

Before readers even open the book and read Esperanza's stories, they are immediately presented with a potent symbol of space within the title: *The House on Mango Street*. Each word of the title functions as part of an equation that reveals a significant "place identity" within the text, each symbol connected to different aspects of masculinity, femininity and ethnicity. Clearly, images of home and dwelling-place connect to *house*, and *street* suggests urbanization and civilization.

While *house* signifies the feminine, domestic realm and *street* denotes mobility, a typical masculine trait of agency, *mango* spatially connects the two terms within the title. According to Ines Salazar, "the use of the word 'mango' … refers to a widely available and very popular fruit in Mexico and other parts of Latin America" (395). Thus, the fruit serves as an exotic symbol of a far-away home, a fruit that maintains popularity based on the fact that the plant grows in large quantities. Further, the fruit in its own locale dispossesses novelty; instead, it functions as a symbol of community. However, the image of the mango, plucked from its roots and brought to Chicago, acts as a symbol of otherness and dislocation. By employing such a loaded term in conjunction with images of living in an urban location, Cisneros immediately reveals the significance of a metropolitan space, specifically for men and women who left their homes in order to create new identities.

While dislocation has affected both men and women of Mexican ethnicity, their plight differs in their day-to-day struggles. "The history of Mexican-Americans in Chicago," Salazar offers, "dates back to the 1920s when significant numbers of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans were recruited to work in Chicago's steel mills, stock yards, and railroads to support this nation's industrial expansion" (396). During the rise of industrialization, men from impoverished or economically unstable countries or states moved to larger cities in search of jobs, all hoping to attain the notorious American Dream. Men searched for profitable employment, while women traditionally stayed home caring for children or completing other domestic duties. Cisneros herself grew up in Chicago, Illinois, under similar circumstances because her father, according to Cisneros' biography *A Home in the Heart: The Story of Sandra Cisneros* (2005), "moved from Mexico to Chicago to work on the railroad during the Mexican Revolution of 1910, to escape the violence," ultimately bringing his family along with him; thus, Cisneros and her family lived in Chicago during a time of increased immigration and industry (Brackett 10). As a result, *The House on Mango Street* serves as a type of autobiography for Cisneros, who grew up moving around slum neighborhoods in Chicago, dreaming of an "actual house" in the face of constant disappointment. In the biography, Cisneros explains the "balancing act" that she had to endure while growing up as a "Chicano and American, [referring] to the experience [as] 'straddling these two cultures'" (Brackett, *A Home* 10). Not only did Cisneros and other women of color experienced difficulty because of their race, but they were also marginalized because of their gender. Cisneros acknowledges this when she begins the novella with a dedication in English and Spanish—"A las Mujeres/To the Women" (dedication page)—which immediately brings up issues of race and gender that are inseparable. In her article on the Chicana feminist perspective, Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano argues that, "there are important differences between a Chicana perspective and the mainstream feminist one with regard to issues of race, culture, and class" (140). As a symbol of domesticity and a type of captivity for women, a house carries significant meaning when equated to identity. Like a mango in the bustling city of Chicago, Cisneros felt out of place as her family moved around with no place to permanently call home, which results in her—and Esperanza's—desire for a home of her own, where she can form her own identity.

Therefore, Esperanza's experiences as a Chicana female tint her descriptions of houses, particularly the one on Mango Street.

The Other American Dream

Adopting the same title as that of the novella, the first chapter, narrated by Esperanza, focuses entirely on the main homes and dwelling-places of the Cordero family, immediately establishing a binary between the homes of dreams and the homes of reality. Beginning the chapter, Esperanza says: "We didn't always live on Mango Street" (3). She goes on to list from scattered memories the other places where she and her family have lived, concluding, "what I remember most is moving a lot" (3). During this early period of dislocation and resettling, her parents comforted Esperanza and her siblings with bedside stories of "a real house that would be ours for always [and that would be] white with trees around it, a great big yard and grass growing without a fence" (4). Clearly, the concept of the American Dream occupied the thoughts and desires of the Cordero family as they moved around Chicago, revealing the connection between dwelling-places and economic identity. Notice, however, the lack of a fence in Esperanza's description; instead of a space of imprisonment, Esperanza and her family desire an open, less regulated area. This description signifies a deeper, cultural reading of space and dwelling in the American Dream ideology for those who have a hyphen in their nationality. The mark of the hyphen symbolizes the morphing of two separate, distinct entities, while immediately indicating otherness. Because the Cordero family is *Mexican*-American, and not simply the stock American of Caucasians, they long for more freedom and liberty, which becomes represented by their home. The "rhetoric of cultural 'unbelonging'" for immigrants results from the system of nationhood, which automatically functions through "exclusion, inclusion, and membership" (Socolovsky 3). The hyphen serves as a visible marker that includes while it excludes, signifying a difference between two adjectives while attempting to connect the two. As a result, people like the Corderos with hyphens in their nationality exist in an intermediate space of national identity, resulting in exile and dislocation. Once accepted into American membership, mainstream ideology encourages homeownership as a way to signify a person's social presence and worth. In the case of Esperanza as a marginalized character, home becomes a crucial force that she works with and against, though the politics of homeownership do not apply to those who spatially inhabit an outsider's position, and definitely do not apply to women. Thus, in spite of one's hard work, as represented by Esperanza's father, the rise from rags to riches eludes the outcasts. As a result, the American Dream transforms into the American Nightmare (Bloom xv).

After lullabies of the ultimate dream home, the house on Mango Street is a rude awakening and disappointment to Esperanza. The house of reality is nothing like the house of her or her parents' dreams: "But the house on Mango Street is not the way they told it at all. It's small and red with tight steps in front and windows so small you'd think they were holding their breath. Bricks are crumbling in places, and the front door is so swollen you have to push hard to get in"

(4). Instead of the large, open yard, the house has "no front yard" at all (4). If the home represents the American Dream for the Corderos, then a forceful entry reveals how difficult the dream is to achieve for the Cordero family, but specifically for Esperanza as a Chicana female who equates the home with her identity. This is not the home that Esperanza wants to call "ours." In fact, her description mirrors that of a rape scene. The house, small and red, resembles a young Hispanic girl. As ecofeminism equates the land with the female body, the house in this description alludes to Esperanza's body, or identity. As if bracing for protection, the house serves as a metaphor for the girl and holds its breath against the attacker who "[pushes] hard to get in" (4). Esperanza's choice of words reveals her fear of living in a bad neighborhood as a young Chicana girl. It appears that her father echoes that fear by nailing "wooden bars" to the window (5). Although he says it is so that the windows "don't fall out" (5), the bars also prevent anyone else from coming in uninvited, though the material of the bars themselves further reveals the futile nature of his efforts, compared to stronger metal alternatives. The house contains a stigma for those who live outside of Mango Street, signifying danger, poverty, and exile. At the end of the chapter, Esperanza recounts a moment when a nun asks her if she "lives *there*", and Esperanza, "[feeling] like nothing," knew then that she had to have a "real house [that she] could point to" (5; emphasis added). The stigma attached to "*there*" alienates one demographic from another, and Esperanza immediately equates "nothing" with Mango Street, where no place worth living exists, and further equates "nothing" with herself (5). As Esperanza's eyes follow the nun's pointed finger to "there," she is forced to view "her surroundings through the prism of the nun's perspective and feels ashamed" (Salazar 393). The moment Esperanza experiences W.E.B. DuBois's concept of "double consciousness," according to Salazar, causes her to experience "self-alienation" as she views herself through the eyes of a woman who is not in an "othered" position (394). Ultimately, Esperanza internalizes the idea that her possessions and commodities—her house—define who she is and equate to her identity. According to Regina Betz, "The manner in which a person communicates suggests something about her identity" (18). Throughout the novella, Esperanza never misses a chance to distance herself from the house on Mango Street, as well as Mango Street itself, creating a clear boundary between herself and the space around her. Throughout the novella, Esperanza decides upon her own dream house, as opposed to her parents' dream, or the house that automatically comes with a husband or father. Although Esperanza's situation as a poor, Chicana female limits her ability for homeownership without marriage, she continues to dream of a space that she feels is good enough to define her self-worth.

Near the end of her story, in a chapter entitled "Four Skinny Trees," Esperanza relates herself to trees that have been planted by the city, revealing her acknowledgment of dislocation and exile as an "other"-American in a place she resents. Like the concrete that encloses the trees, Esperanza's house on Mango Street and the visible bars on her windows confine her to her space. Esperanza admits to feeling misunderstood like the four trees that "do not belong here but are here" (74). By employing the word "here," Esperanza locates herself to a space of immediacy with the trees, as compared to a word like "there" that the nun uses, a word that signifies distance

and separation. Just as the nun creates a boundary between herself and Esperanza, Esperanza attempts to inhabit the space that the trees successfully exist in. After many chapters about longing for a new place and distancing herself from Mango Street, Esperanza shares a story of seeking refuge in nature, a space not tainted by the poverty-stricken politics of the suburbs. When Esperanza can no longer stand the sights of Mango Street, she considers the secret strength of the roots of the trees that penetrate deep beneath the earth with a "reason for being" (74). Despite their condition as trees planted in concrete, seemingly controlled by someone other than themselves, they continue to serve their ultimate purpose and grow. Esperanza finds encouragement from the trees, revealing how she views her own identity as a girl in captivity. Early on Esperanza learns the truth about the American Dream, yet she still internalizes the value of a specific kind of space, namely a house that projects a certain aesthetic value. Instead of finding and accepting a home in a place that protects her from the elements, surrounded by family and friends, Esperanza ties the notion of home to the commodity of the house itself, thus limiting that dwelling-place to a specific function, the same way the trees serve a specific "reason for being" (74). In other words, the house that Esperanza strongly abhors does in fact protect her to a certain extent from outside elements, but she resists the house as a home because it does not coincide with the homes of commercials or fairy tales. And throughout the narrative, Esperanza's reason for being and her purpose in life fixate on the goal of obtaining the dream house of her own, in spite of whatever roadblocks—race, gender, socioeconomics—stand in her way. With each vignette, Esperanza fills the text with stories of homes and houses, and uses familiar objects or people to serve as metaphors of her situation to discuss purpose, belonging and place.

As Esperanza narrates her story, she adds in more features that she requires of her dream home, each revealing components of her psyche. Esperanza begins the chapter "Bums in the Attic" with an assertive statement: "I want a house on a hill like the ones with the gardens where papa works" (86). Skipping introductions and formalities, Esperanza gets to the main point of her story, once again defining her dream home. Instead of the dream home that her parents fantasize about, Esperanza describes her home with no connection to her family, adding one important feature that her previous description lacks: the hill. This chapter follows a few traumatic experiences for Esperanza on Mango Street, so the inclusion of the hill reveals her need for safety. While her father attempts to provide Esperanza with safety by placing bars on her window, Esperanza sees the bars as a sign of imprisonment. Esperanza believes that, the "people who live on hills sleep so close to the stars they forget those of us who live too much on the earth" (86), indicating a desire for spiritual sanctuary that she can never find on earth: the stars in the heavens are unmovable, reappearing each night with the type of consistency that Esperanza's life lacks. But instead of celestial beings, Esperanza's dwelling is associated with "last week's garbage [and] rats" (87). From the top of the hills, the people in nice homes of their own literally look down on those who struggle to exist in their space, people who are as much cast-offs of society as garbage and infestation. Once Esperanza comes to an age of acknowledging the social

difference, she no longer travels to work with her father, too "ashamed" to "[stare] out the window like the hungry … tired of looking at what [she] can't have" (86). As a result, Esperanza determines to "one day" have her "own house" that is clearly not on Mango Street, as evidenced when she says she "will not forget where [she] came from" (87). Her choice of words indicates a separation—where she will one day be compared to where she once was. Mango Street is the place she "came from," the place she left in order to have her own space. Ultimately, Esperanza feels that she must leave her place of exile in order to have the opportunity for homeownership and, ultimately, a different identity, one that is not limited by the social inequities of her otherness. In this space away from Mango Street, Esperanza hopes to be identified by attributes other than her name and its limitations.

The Space of a Name

Not only does Esperanza fail to fit the space of Mango Street, but even her name refuses to inhabit the space designated for her. "In English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters," Esperanza explains early on in the novella (10). For English speakers, specifically, Spanish words take up too much space in the mouth of those who can only stumble out foreign-sounding words like *Esperanza*; therefore, the hegemonic class renames according to their preference, regardless of the identity that resides in a person's name. Nicknames or more familiar names are offered, like subbing John for Juan. Like the hyphen in a person's nationality, bilingualism indicates a merging, but also separateness of two entities that are contingent upon coexistence. For Esperanza, the Spanish signifier of her name alienates her from the rest of society, who casts off people like the Corderos to the unwanted areas of town. Her assimilated name in English is easier to remember and to say for non-Spanish speakers, but it also carries weight in its meaning: hope. One wonders though: Hope for what? For Esperanza, hope means to escape the confines of Mango Street, hope to own a house that she can point to in a place where she is no longer marginalized. Although Esperanza received her name from her great-grandmother, she states specifically, "I don't want to inherit her place by the window" (10), which reveals Esperanza's fear that she will inherit immobility based on her gender and ethnicity. Even at home Esperanza has no nickname, unlike her sister, and so she says, "But I am always Esperanza" (11), indicating a desire to be renamed into something shorter and easier like an English name. Near the end of the novella, one of Esperanza's elderly aunts reminds her: "You will always be Esperanza. You will always be Mango Street" (105). Here, the connection between Esperanza's name, place-attachment, and identity affirm her struggle. For those who live on the outskirts of a flourishing society because of their ethnicity, places and names are potent symbols. As if her aunt knew of Esperanza's goal of leaving Mango Street, she says: "When you leave you must remember to come back for the others. A circle, understand? ... You can't erase what you know. You can't erase who you are" (11). In spite of Esperanza's efforts to continuously distance herself from the stigma of Mango Street, to eradicate the tainted space from her identity, she still cannot forget her roots. In the next chapter, Esperanza describes a brief conversation with her friend Alicia, who migrated from Guadalajara: "[T]oday [Alicia] is

listening to my sadness because I don't have a house" (106), which again confirms Esperanza's need for a home that can represent her. Not only does Esperanza narrate the stories of Mango Street to readers, but she also shares with friends her dreams of homeownership, and Alicia's response supports what Esperanza's aunt says:

> You live right here, 4006 Mango, Alicia says and points to the house I am ashamed of. No, this isn't my house I say and shake my head as if shaking could undo the year I've lived here. I don't belong. I don't ever want to come from here. You have a home, Alicia, and one day you'll go there, to a town you remember, but me I never had a house, not even a photograph…only one I dream of.
> No, Alicia says. Like it or not you are Mango Street, and one day you'll come back too. Not me. Not until somebody makes it better. (106-07)

Through this passage, Esperanza reveals one of her main reasons why she cannot identify with Mango Street: it needs to be made "better." In its current condition of a poverty-stricken neighborhood, Esperanza's need for safety, a condition she sees in the houses on the hill, increases along with her awareness of her situation. Esperanza does not want a place by the window, like the other women in the story, because she does not want to sit in a similitude of safety, watching the neighborhood grow worse before her eyes. Instead, Esperanza desires to leave Mango Street behind, returning only after someone other than herself has made it better. Making a full circle from when Esperanza introduces the etymology of her name to readers, her aunt reminds her that her name means hope, that she *can* leave Mango Street, but that she must also return for the others. Unfortunately, however, it remains unclear at the end of the novella whether or not Esperanza does, in fact, escape the confines of Mango Street.

Conclusion

Once upon a time, Esperanza internalized the fairy tales of the American Dream by which her parents reared her, but the "happily-ever-after" ending never came; her dream house never existed on Mango Street. Other girls in the novella find an illusion of freedom from the confines of Mango Street, but they never truly leave or create their own identities. Like the wooden bars on Esperanza's windows and the skinny trees Esperanza identifies with, women throughout Mango Street are held in a system of patriarchal captivity because of their gender, which is also reinforced because of their ethnicity. For example, Rafaela, a young married woman, "gets locked indoors because her husband is afraid Rafaela will run away since she is too beautiful to look at" (79). Like Esperanza's grandmother, who always sat by the window (10), Rafaela dreams she is Rapunzel, another example of the powerful influence of fairy tales, longing for freedom from her domestic imprisonment (79). Unable to leave, however, Rafaela requests the "kids" of Mango Street to bring her back coconut or papaya juice (80), which function as the symbol of the mango, emphasizing a longing for a faraway home. "Down the street" (80), where

the ladies dance and are freed from their houses and husbands, "women much older than [Rafaela] ... open homes with keys" (80). Esperanza does not reveal the marital status of the women, but she does emphasize the reason why Rafaela idolizes them: they come and go in their own homes and have the keys in their hands, keys which symbolize tokens of power. Esperanza also asks Sally, a mischievous girl in the neighborhood, if she wishes she "didn't have to go home [but could] stop in front of a house, a nice one with flowers and big windows and steps" that she could climb on her own, "where a room is waiting for [her] (82). Esperanza goes on to describe the trees, the blue sky, and never having "to worry what people said because [she] never belonged here anyway … and nobody would think [she is] strange because [she] likes to dream and dream" (83). Ultimately, the question Esperanza asks Sally is really about herself, and the nice house she mentions resembles the American Dream house, which these girls can never obtain. But in the end, Esperanza takes the power in her own hands by rewriting her own story. In "A House of My Own," Esperanza writes:

> Not a flat. Not an apartment in back. Not a man's house. Not a daddy's. A house all my own. With my porch and my pillow, my pretty purple petunias. My books and my stories. My two shoes waiting beside the bed. Nobody to shake a stick at. Nobody's garbage to pick up after. Only a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem. (108)

Refusing to settle for the American Nightmare, and no longer deluding herself about the myth of the American Dream, Esperanza acknowledges a need to rewrite the stories for herself and, ultimately, the other marginalized citizens of the United States. According to Kelly Wissman, "Esperanza's alternative 'happily ever after' comes through locating the vocation of writing as the fulcrum for *self-definition* and social change" (17; emphasis added). Esperanza does not completely abandon the ideology that a house represents a person's ideology, nor does she give up on her particular aesthetic preferences completely; however, instead of allowing herself to perpetuate the American Nightmare within her own self-definition, she determines to rewrite her own ending in which, whatever the condition of the house or however it compares to the houses on the hill, it belongs to her and she to it. The house symbolizes a place of solitude in its quietness and cleanliness through the imagery of pure snow and blank paper. Contrasted with images of garbage and rats on Mango Street, this home is a pure, clean, safe and undefiled sanctuary, where Esperanza finds peace in her identity. As a female, who is also "othered" by her ethnicity, Esperanza lacks the agency to change Mango Street, or leave on her own; therefore, readers never really know if Esperanza ever escapes. However, one thing remains true: Esperanza's spirit leaves the littered streets of Mango Street through her stories, stories that readers pick up in Sandra Cisneros' book. Ultimately, Esperanza takes the power into her own hands, literally, when she pens her narrative, creating a space of freedom, where she cannot be silenced or controlled by anyone other than herself.

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